



**U.S. Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Western District of Texas**

Johnny Sutton, U.S. Attorney

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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20 ARRESTED FOR SCHEMING TO SELL MILLIONS OF COUNTERFEIT CIGARETTES

United States Attorney Johnny Sutton, FBI Special Agent in Charge Ralph Diaz, ATF Special Agent in Charge Donnie Carter, ICE Special Agent in Charge Alonso Pena and San Antonio Police Chief Albert Ortiz announced today the arrest of, and federal charges filed against, 20 individuals in connection with a large-scale counterfeit cigarette distribution operation in San Antonio.

Those arrested earlier today include:

Wael Wahid Jamal Abdelaziz
aka "TONY"

Khair Abdallah Mohammad Abdelaziz
aka "KITTY"

Sayel Shihaden Abdallah
aka "SAM"

Makram Sayel Hijaz
aka "MAC"

Maisar Hassan Abdalla
aka "JOHNNY ESCOBEDO"

Moayed Nabil Shalabi
aka "ADAM"

Mohanad Nabil Shalabi
Mohammad Sayel Hijaz
aka "BENNIE"

Amin Abdel Alshalabi
John Anthony Delacruz
aka "JUAN CONTRERAS"

Farouk Ibrahim Abulaban
Nabil Saleh Abdelquader

aka "NABIL QUADER"

Madhat SF Orabi
aka "DAVID"

Ziad Mahmoud Alsalameh
aka "ZEE"

aka "ZIAD MAHMOUD AL BATAINCH"

Haleem Hamoudeh Hamoudeh
aka "MIKE"

Isam Hmaidan
aka "SAM"

Mohammad Diab Al-Rafati
Said Issa

Mohamed Ahmad Salameh
Suleman Bhojani

Authorities are still searching for AZIZ ABDALLAH ABDELAZIZ, Awni Mahmoud Derieh, aka "ASFAR MUNTHER," and JESSE DANIEL PETERSEN.

With the exception of MOHAMED AHMAD SALAMEH and SULEMAN BHOJANI, the defendants were charged in a 34-count sealed indictment returned yesterday by a federal grand jury in San Antonio. The indictment was unsealed this afternoon by United States Magistrate Judge John Primomo.

The indictment alleges that since April 21, 2004, the defendants conspired together to ship, transport, receive, possess, sell and distribute approximately 9.6 million counterfeit cigarettes. The indictment specifically alleges 30 individual transactions involving the sale of counterfeit cigarettes—cigarettes whose packages contained falsely made, forged, altered or counterfeit Texas tax stamps. According to the indictment, each individual transaction involved at least 300 cartons of counterfeit cigarettes that the defendants would generally purchase for between \$10 and \$15 per carton.

— more —

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In addition to the conspiracy charge, the indictment charges Sayel Shihaden Abdallah, Makram Sayel Hijaz and Maisar Hassa Abdalla with unauthorized use, acquisition or possession of food stamps. The indictment alleges that on March 17, 2005, Abdallah and Hijaz purchased \$2,046 worth of food stamps for \$1,000 cash; Abdalla, \$505 in food stamps for \$250 cash. Finally, Isam Hmaidan is also charged with one count of dealing in counterfeit obligations. On September 14, 2005, Isam Hmaidan allegedly sold four counterfeit \$100 bills to an undercover agent.

Federal authorities filed criminal complaints this morning against MOHAMED AHMAD SALAMEH and SULEMAN BHOJANI charging them with shipping, transporting, receiving, possessing, selling and distributing counterfeit cigarettes.

In addition to the arrests this morning, investigators executed several search warrants and seized approximately \$500,000 in cash and numerous vehicles believed to be proceeds from the alleged criminal enterprise.

All defendants arrested this morning remain in federal custody pending detention hearings scheduled for October 4, 2005, before United States Magistrate Judge Pamela Mathy.

This continuing investigation is being conducted by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the San Antonio Police Department. Agents from the U.S. Marshals Service, Transportation Security Administration, Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigation, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission and the Texas Department of Public Safety assisted in today's arrests. Assistant United States Attorney Don Calvert is prosecuting the case on behalf of the Government.

An indictment is a formal accusation of criminal conduct, not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed innocent unless and until convicted through due process of law.

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